

# The Briefing



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## Children's ministry: burning brightly and longer

[Gordon Cheng \(http://matthiasmedia.com/briefing/authors/gordon-cheng/\)](http://matthiasmedia.com/briefing/authors/gordon-cheng/) | 1 December, 2014

The fourth of four principles in this series on children's ministry is about training others to get involved in the work. The most important thing to do in order to achieve this is to protect your existing children's ministry team from the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, insofar as this lies within your power.

Of course, our basic assumption is that your children's ministry team members love Jesus, and are there to teach others about the love of Jesus as well. We believe and teach that this happens only in and through his propitiating death and resurrection for our sins.

Children's ministry, as we've said in previous articles, can sometimes be based on the desperate need for peace and quiet for adults while the church gathering is happening. Along with this, it is a ministry that tends to attract enthusiastic volunteers, who burn brightly and briefly before burning out.

Now it has to be said that this is not necessarily disastrous. As long as the volunteers concerned love Jesus and love children, many great things can be accomplished for the kingdom of God. But Bruce Linton and those like me who have trained with Bruce are convinced that there is a more excellent way. So here are four ways ahead for people who believe that burning brightly and briefly is good, but burning brightly and longer is better.

First, under God, you must have a plan. Second, you must choose leaders who are not obvious choices. Third, you must be prepared not to teach your leaders too much. Fourth, you must get some theological training to help you to do the first thing (that is, to plan).

## Have a plan

The basic plan is to tell the story of Jesus, and when you are told—as some are told—“Here’s your lesson for today and there’s your class of 25 children just over there, off you go” then this is the best plan that you can have, along with two songs. (The two songs are ‘Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so’ and ‘The best book to read is the Bible’. Google them, and ask for volunteers from the class to help you teach them while you read the rest of this article.)

But eventually you will need to carve time out of your week, each week, to prayerfully develop a plan that tells the story of Jesus from every part of the Bible, from beginning to end, over the period of a 4-6 year syllabus. This is not straightforward. It is, however, essential. One of the greatest sins of Bible teaching is to make the Bible boring, and nothing is more boring for children than the sense that this lesson is identical, in every single respect except that the teacher is a year older, to the one we did 12 months ago. Even if they don’t remember, the children will over time pick up that you are slightly older, slightly more burned out, and slightly less excited about the glorious gospel of salvation from sin and the judgement of God. That’s bad.

So making a plan means thinking carefully, prayerfully, broadly and deeply about how and what you would like to say to children about Jesus over the course of a term, a year, and three to four years. Three to four years is enough, because at the end of that time they will no longer be the children that they were, and in the grace of God, you will have begun to invite them to help you improve your program and to help you teach it.

## Choose unobvious leaders

The obvious choices fall into two categories: people from the education sector who already have teaching skills, and enthusiastic volunteers.

It hardly needs to be said that the obvious choices are also good choices, with all the usual qualifications about whether they are actually Christians or not. My first Sunday School teaching gig was through a friend when I was in Year 11 of high school. Let us say, given that no-one stands ready to witness to the opposite, I was brilliant. But it’s only in retrospect that I’m able to say that I was definitely a Christian, and I’m still praying that the friend who extended the invitation actually is.

Yet those with teaching skills are often admired not so much for their ability to teach as for their ability to bring calm control and discipline to a large group of children. It is a thing of beauty indeed to see a group of generally out-of-control individuals sitting politely and ready for the next instruction. Often they will be doing it not out of fear, but out of love and respect for the teacher, alongside a number of brilliant psycho-social tactics that have been taught for just this purpose. (“There will be a prize for the quietest child in the room at the end of 60 seconds”. Brilliant!)

But what if, as well as valuing teachers with the ability to bring calm, we valued the somewhat SloppyTeenager who can befriend NaughtyBoy in a way that no-one else has been able to?

CalmTeacher gives children the task of cutting out or drawing figures to represent the family tree of Abraham. NaughtyBoy has picked up something, which is that we are all children of Abraham if we trust in Jesus. Or, as the song puts it, "Father Abraham had many sons".

NaughtyBoy does a family tree with not just two sons for Abraham (Ishmael and Isaac), or eight sons (the correct number, see [Gen 25:1-2 \(https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Gen%2025.1-2\)](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Gen%2025.1-2)) but as many as he can fit in before CalmTeacher notices. Why has he done it? Well, because SloppyTeenager was talking to him while CalmTeacher was doing other things, and SloppyTeenager and NaughtyBoy were able to work out together that yes, anyone who puts their trust in Jesus is a son of Abraham.

CalmTeacher loves SloppyTeenager because he has volunteered to help, and because he's the only helper who really seems to 'get' NaughtyBoy. But at times like this she is confused and bemused because SloppyTeenager seems to be mucking up the lesson plan that everyone had worked out ahead of time.

Because love covers over a multitude of sins, lesson derailments like this happen all the time in the life of our churches, and we just get on with teaching the gospel of Christ. But even better would be for you, as the children's worker or Sunday School superintendent, to recognize SloppyTeenager for the gospel servant that he is, and actively look for many more like him, difficult though he is to accommodate within the system.

## Don't teach leaders too much

In the world of teaching the Bible to children, there is enormous demand for (and enormous output of) good teaching resources for little people. There is no doubt that some are brilliant, and especially worth checking out is the material that Sandy Galea<sup>1</sup>([#fn-26377-1](#))-and Stephanie Carmichael<sup>2</sup>([#fn-26377-2](#))-have produced. Mark Barry also has some excellent free online resources at *Visual Unit*.<sup>3</sup>([#fn-26377-3](#)) Use them! Find others.

But if your aim is to expand and grow a children's ministry, then long term you will want not only to use these resources, but to develop a team of people who will come up with such ideas on their very own. There is no Bible verse that specifically teaches this, but it is a good application of the wise proverb, "Give a man a fish and you will feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you will lose a husband for the weekend". (Or something like that.)

Here, there is no substitute for gathering your group of leaders on a regular and time-consuming basis, preferably weekly, in order to read the Bible and prepare for your lessons together. This is demanding and difficult, not only for the leaders, but also for the leader of the leaders, and possibly also for others in the church who would like to see those

leaders involved in other worthwhile projects. Yet when these leaders are gathered together around the word of God, together with a group leader who really understands and loves both the gospel and children, it is a time of joy and fellowship in the gospel that will have consequences for eternity.

Not only will those weekly Bible/preparation times have consequences for eternity, they will result in programs for children that are the envy of churches for kilometres around, and actually result in children coming under the sound of the gospel and becoming disciples of Jesus.

Examples of good ideas abound. But as just one possibility to consider, why not organize a leader's excursion? Ask them to think for a while about the subject of sin, and then get them to bring \$10 for a trip to the local magic shop. Do it as an excursion, or if that's impossible just get them to visit the shop by themselves. Then get together, show each other magic tricks, and get each leader to explain how their magic trick illustrates some aspect of sin. Don't just collect magic tricks for the sake of entertainment—they should no more be pointless fun than the games at youth group are pointless fun. Work out how to link them to the idea that you are teaching. The only thing better than pointless fun is purpose-filled fun—a deep lesson that you and your leaders will discover through experience.

## Get theologically trained

Fourth and finally, avail yourself of theological training to help you to do the first thing (that is, to plan), and to sustain yourself through a lifetime of ministry.




Enthusiasm and a knowledge of God's saving gospel will take you a long way—indeed it will take you to heaven. What it will not do, unless you are one of God's gifted freaks, is equip you for the long haul in children's ministry—or any other ministry for that matter.

For long-term ministry, you will need the sort of input that theological training, and very little else, will give. What is the big story of the Bible, and how can we see that every promise it makes finds its 'yes' in Christ Jesus? How are we rightly to understand the meaning of David and Goliath, or Gideon and his fleece, or Josiah the boy king, or Elisha's floating of the axe-head, or the healing of the man born blind? Brilliant Sunday school stories; frequently misread and misrepresented.

Prayerful re-reading of the Bible will, under God, provide the answer that the Bible itself gives, for the Bible is its own best commentary. A genuinely useful theological education will do this as well, only faster. That's because you will put more time in due to the course requirements, and the teachers that you have will have put their own time in as well. Not all theological educations are equal, so make sure that you choose a theological institution where Jesus is honoured and the Bible is accepted as his inerrant word. But Bruce and I both recommend Moore Theological College in Sydney, and we pray that you will be wise in finding your own local equivalent.

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Not everyone can or will aspire to be a full-time children's worker, but even if not, the work of discipling children begins with the parents but extends to the whole church of Jesus. For those of us who are involved in this joyful ministry, we will (under God) be continually looking for ways to strengthen and increase this ministry by growing as Christians ourselves, and looking for ways to involve everyone in the church who are in themselves readers of God's word, students of his Holy Spirit, and people desiring to live in accordance with his will.

1. See <https://kidswise.com.au/about/about-the-author> (<https://kidswise.com.au/about/about-the-author>).  (#fnref-26377-1).
2. See <http://matthiasmedia.com.au/tlo/> (<http://matthiasmedia.com.au/tlo/>).  (#fnref-26377-2).
3. See <http://visualunit.me/> (<http://visualunit.me/>).  (#fnref-26377-3).

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